

Potent vaccine has anxious audience

By Jackie Burrell
CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Jubilation greeted the news last summer of a vaccine that could help prevent cervical cancer. And awareness was heightened even more by a monthslong media blitz by the vaccine manufacturer, which used the tag line "Tell Someone" to urge girls and young women to protect themselves.

But getting the shots has been another matter.

Most county health clinics, which provide free immunizations for children from low-income families, don't yet have the HPV vaccine, which is recommended for girls and young women ages 9 to 26. Neither does Planned Parenthood.

At Kaiser Permanente, where doctors helped develop the first HPV screening tests, the first vaccine shipments began arriving only last week.

But private pediatricians and many university health centers, including all University of California campuses, have had the \$360 vaccine since August - even before major insurers began covering the most expensive vaccine ever manufactured.

"People came in asking for it," said Lafayette pediatrician Patti Francis. "The moms are the ones who are eager, certainly if they have teenagers. The issue was, who was going to be paying for it?"

Many parents simply have paid for the first of the three-part injection out-of-pocket, say staff members at East Bay Pediatrics, also in Lafayette.

At the University of the Pacific's August orientation session, parents were urged to get their freshman daughters vaccinated, even if they had to pay for it themselves.

By last month, most major insurers, including Aetna, Cigna, Blue Shield and Kaiser, had signed on.

State agencies have been working together to get the vaccine out as broadly as possible, but, says Dr. Eileen Yamada from the California Health Department's immunization branch, their efforts have been hampered by the sheer financial and organizational logistics involved.

"A lot of (private) folks could order the vaccine before it was available through the public sector," said Yamada.

The state is still working out financial contracts with Merck, the Gardasil vaccine's manufacturer, so the injections can be funded through the federal Vaccines for Children program for impoverished families. Planned Parenthood and Contra Costa County's health clinics don't expect to have the vaccine until January, and only some of Alameda County's clinics have it now.

The precedent-setting vaccine prevents four sexually-transmitted strains of the Human Papillomavirus, including two high-risk strains implicated in 70 percent of the nation's cervical cancer cases. All four are associated with genital warts.

And 20 million Americans are infected with HPV now.

"It's an extraordinary breakthrough to be able to vaccinate anybody against cancer," said Dr. Ruth Shaber, Kaiser's director of women's health services. "Cervical cancer is different from other gynecological cancers. (HPV) tends to strike younger women, when they're first sexually active, late teens to early 20s."

Berkeley parent Diane Wiederstein wanted to get her 14-year-old daughter vaccinated long before she became sexually active, to make sure she'd be protected later on. But she found that the vaccine also provided "a teachable moment." It was the perfect opening to discuss potentially difficult topics -- sexual health and values -- with her teenager.

"If we can have this kind of conversation, I can't think of a better start," said Wiederstein. "She sees me as having looked out for her health, and that includes looking out for her sexual health."

Experts at the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention say that more than 80 percent of the nation's women will contract HPV by age 50. Some will never know it. Their immune systems will clear the infection.

For others, the disease progresses to its precancerous stage. In 10 years, it's cancer.

Initially, there was some concern that parents and some groups might shy away from a vaccine that battles a sexually-transmitted disease.

But Focus on the Family, a group which emphasizes abstinence until marriage as the best means of combating sexually-transmitted diseases, issued a statement of "support and encouragement" for the "universal availability of HPV vaccines."

The group opposes mandatory immunization, however, saying the decision to vaccinate should be left up to parents.

Last month, Michigan became the first state to pass legislation requiring the vaccine for sixth-grade girls entering public school in 2007. "Abstinence is all well and good," said Dr. Michelle Famula, director of UC-Davis' Cowell Student Health Center. "But individuals are more likely to have multiple monogamous relationships than single, and cancer is a steep price to pay. And it does not take phenomenal creativity to envision that anyone who's not been vaccinated is at risk."

Kaiser doctors and other health experts are urging any woman who has not been immunized to get an HPV screening every three years. As of Sept. 26, when the governor signed SB 1245 into California law, that's covered by insurance too.

Jackie Burrell covers family and parenting topics. Reach her at 925-977-8568 or jburrell@cctimes.com.